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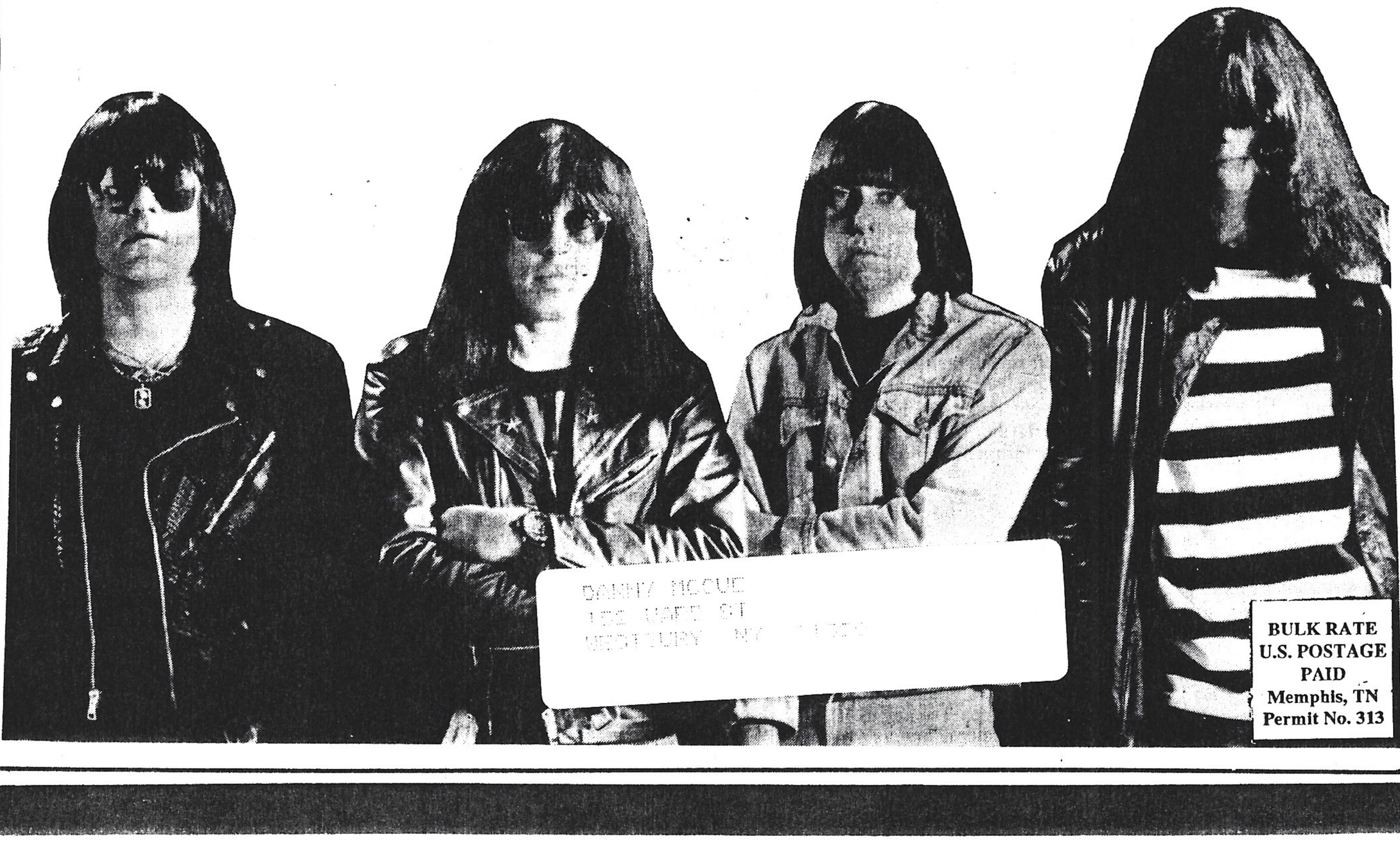
The Ramones
Punk's Founding Band



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Gabba- Gabba-Hey!

An Interview With Punk's Founding Group, The Ramones

by Danny McCue

The borough of Queens, New York is separated from Manhattan by the East River and is a place where concrete, mortar, and steel mingle with gangsters, madmen, illegal Irish immigrants, Greeks, Italians, and blue collar elderly not yet relocated to Florida. At its heart lies Forest Hills, which for a time in the early 70's served as the stomping ground for a brand of rock and roll that would resound in such disparate places as the music halls of London, the streets of L.A., and the teahouses of Tokyo.

Formed in the winter of 1974, the Ramones, relying on the twin disciplines of speed and minimal chord changes, changed the course of 70's rock, placing themselves in defiant contrast to the more commercial and excessive acts of the day such as Yes and Emerson, Lake & Palmer. The first among the bands that made CBGB's, a seedy bar on the Bowery, a happening new music mecca, the Ramones recorded their Sire label debut on a budget of $6,400, and while the album only charted as high as #111 on the charts in the U.S., in England it was the beginning of a groundswell that grew into a national obsession. The group's 1976 appearances at London's Roadhouse club left a wake of teenagers inspired to pick up guitars and beat on drums and quickly transfer their amateurism to local stages. Members of the Sex Pistols and the Clash stood shoulder to shoulder within the sweaty confines of the Roadhouse, part of the constituency that made up the Ramones' first British audience.

Although the band would reach its zenith with the 1977 release of Rocket To Russia*— their first album to feature a succession of memorable singles such as "Sheena Is A Punk Rocker," "Rockaway Beach," and "Do You Wanna Dance" — the band's drummer, Tommy Ramone, the one member who never really wanted to be in a touring band, would be replaced by Marc Bell, late of Richard Hell's Voidoids. By the time* Road to Ruin*, the band's next LP was released, Marc was rechristened Marky Ramone. The album itself would be greeted with no small amount of controversy among fans due to Johnny Ramone's dominant use of an acoustic guitar on the LP's first single, "Don't Come Close."*

In England It's Alive*, a double LP recorded live at London's Rainbow Theatre in 1977, reached #27 on the U.K. charts. Despite widespread acclaim that it is among the greatest live albums ever recorded,* It's Alive *was never released stateside. Instead, the follow-up to* Road To Ruin *was the soundtrack of their 1977 movie debut in Roger Corman's* Rock and Roll High School.

Shortly thereafter, the fruit of the Ramones one and only collaboration with Phil Spector, End of the Century *was released, again accompanied by the fanfare of a controversial single, this time a remake of the Ronettes' "Baby I Love You," which features Joey backed only by violins.*

After Spector the band tried a succession of producers, none of whom seemed to fit, in hopes of coming up with a hit. Among those the band remains most unhappy with are Graham Gouldman, formerly of 10cc, who softened their sound in search of a pop smash on Pleasant Dreams*, and Berkerkly Records' Ritchie Cordell, who, along with Glen Kolotkin, produced what many consider to be the nadir of their career,* Subterranean Jungle.

The end of the decade has been a period of getting back on track for the Ramones, beginning with Too Tough To Die *(which reunited them with Tommy (Ramone) Erdelyi in the control room) and continuing through* Animal Boy, Halfway To Sanity, *and their latest,* Brain Drain. Brain Drain *also featured their most high-profile single in 10 years, "Pet Sematary," the title track from Stephen King's latest feature film.*

Last summer, founding member and bassist Dee Dee Ramone decided to leave the band to pursue a career in rap as Dee Dee King. He's been replaced by C.J. Ramone, formerly a member of the heavy metal band, Axe Attack.

The interview that follows was done at S.I.R. studios in Lower Manhattan and in Joey Ramone's apartment.

—Danny McCue

Rock & Roll Disc: I understand the Ramones originally came together as a trio.

Johnny Ramone: No, we actually started as a quartet in February of '74, but we were a trio for a short time in April of that year during which time we performed at a friend's party, which may be why some people think that. We didn't really play any jobs until CBGB's in August of '74 by which time we were a quartet again.

Joey Ramone: What happened was we had a bass player who only lasted like two minutes in the band, his name was Ritchie and he had a nervous breakdown. At the time I was playing drums, Dee Dee was singing and playing rhythm guitar, Johnny was playing lead guitar and I think I maybe sang one song — like Dave Clark or something like that.

Johnny and Dee Dee were the ones who originally talked about getting the Ramones together and it was Dee Dee who brought me into the band. He had seen me with the band I was with previously and liked my style, and we used to hang out and drink wine on the bank steps in Forest Hills, Queens.

Now what happened with the Ramones was with each rehearsal the band started getting faster and faster, because Johnny's goal was to be the fastest guitarist in the world and my wrists started locking up.

R&RD: Was Tommy Erdelyi your manager at this point?

Johnny: Yes, but at this point we weren't even out of the rehearsal studio yet. I had just bought a guitar and up to this point my total experience was

that I had played bass guitar for a few months 10 years previously. As rehearsal went on, we switched everything around -- first it was me and Dee Dee on guitar, then I began playing the guitar better than he was, so we switched him to bass.

Joey: Since we weren't playing any gigs, Tommy's role was really that of an advisor. As a matter of fact, when Tommy became our drummer he had never played drums in his life -- the drummers we auditioned to replace me were always too showy and flamboyant. What we wanted was a simple drummer, a timekeeper, and Tommy would sit down to show them how to do it, in the process creating that style of drumming.

R&RD: Were you at all envious of him since you had put in considerable time learning to play the drums yourself?

Joey: Oh no, I was just happy I wouldn't have to play the drums anymore.

R&RD: How much did playing at CBGB's in the summer of '74 change you guys as a band?

Johnny: When we started playing there we'd play about five songs in 10 minutes -- we figured that if nobody knew your songs it didn't make sense to play songs they didn't know for a long period of time. Then as time went on and people had the chance to decide whether they liked us or not, we began to make the set longer.

Joey: If anything, playing at CBGB's made us tighter and stronger and also, because we weren't getting press at the very beginning and any knowledge of us was spread by word of mouth, playing there kind of defined who our earliest audience was. When we started out, we wanted our audience to be kids, but because of the neighborhood and the fact that what we were doing was ahead of its time, the people that we were attracting were the arty crowd, the Warhol types. Those were our first fans.

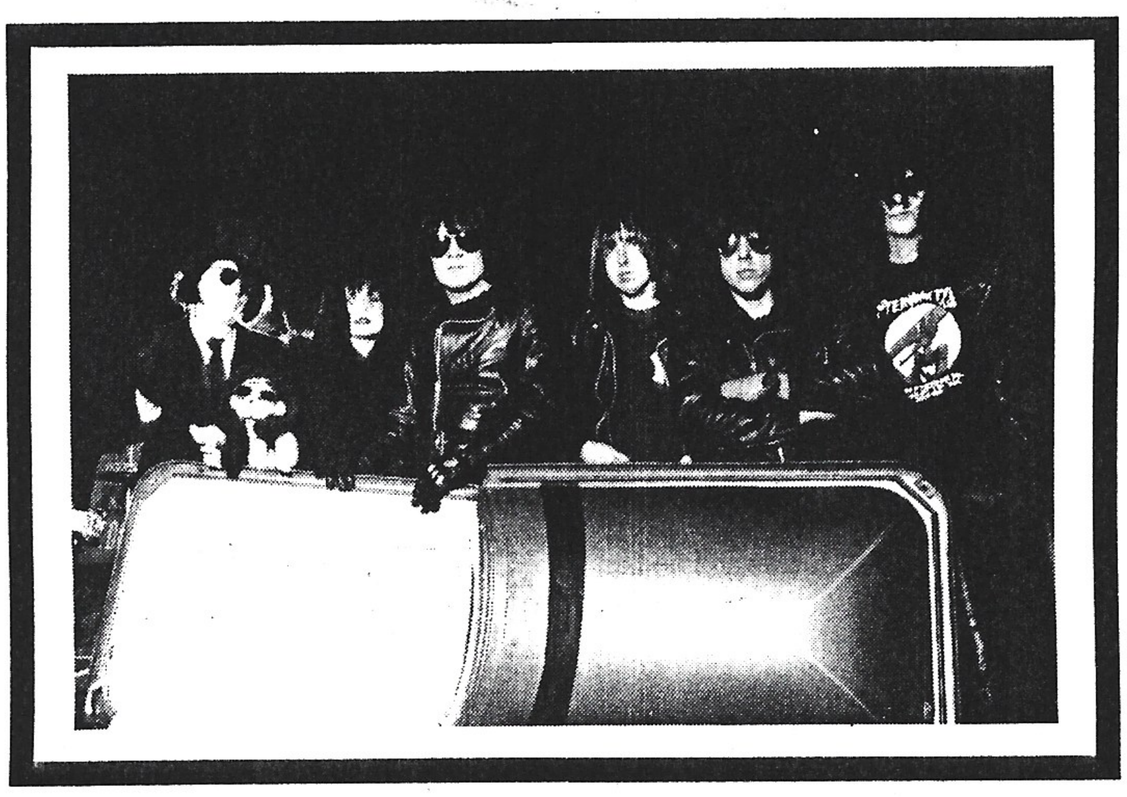
R&RD: Had the CBGB's scene already started by the time you got there?

Johnny: No, we had heard that Television had played there, so we went down to ask for a job, but nobody was in the place. It was just a deserted bar trying to get some kind of music thing going. At the time, people were resistant to going down to the Bowery to play, but by the end of '74, Patti Smith had started playing there and she had some kind of following, evidently, from doing something somewhere else, and by the spring and summer of '75 they had the CBGB's Rock Festival, which was covered by *Rolling Stone*. It had become big and we were filling the place up.

R&RD: Any negative side to that period of your career?

Joey: No, because it was the beginning. It was all something new and CBGB's was probably the right place for it to happen. CBGB's was the womb of creativity in a sense.

R&RD: Would you say that by the summer of '75 you essentially had your act together?



On the set of Pet Sematary with Debbie Harry and Chris Stein

Johnny: Just last week we saw a video from that period and we were surprisingly good at that point. We stopped after each song before starting the next, we were counting off the songs, one after the other, and we had begun to try and get the set in some kind of sequence that would build to a climax. The sets were still kind of short though, but we were doing a 12-song set.

R&RD: Were you conscious that as the Ramones you were doing something different from what the rest of the music business was doing?

Johnny: When we started I think we wanted to play some kind of bubblegum music, but our favorite bands were people like the Stooges, so we'd listen to bubblegum and the Stooges, plus all the old stuff we liked and we tried to figure out other people's songs, which I couldn't. So I said, "forget it, we've got to write something," and we started doing that.

I guess we felt we were doing something different, but in the beginning it was a joke. I thought we'd get signed to a record contract -- which proved harder than I thought -- and that we'd make one album and then break up and get normal jobs and go back to a normal life.

R&RD: In 1976, the band made its historic first visit to England. Was the band aware that what you were doing might have some parallels to the British Invasion of America in 1964?

Johnny: I didn't think it would be an inverse thing of all American bands going over to England. Frankly, there was nobody else that we felt was any good in the New York scene, despite the fact that some of them eventually wound up getting very big, such as the Talking Heads and Blondie. I was always more into heavy stuff, so these bands weren't impressing me.

Joey: It wasn't a conscious thing; what it was was a forward movement. It was unknowingly the future. When we went over to England there was nothing like us yet. Dr. Feelgood was big in the pubs. But we had been getting write-ups in Melody Maker and the New Music Express and our first album had been out for about six months prior to our arrival, so they were looking forward to us coming. We played three nights at a place called the Roadhouse, which held three thousand people, and then we played a club called Dingwald's, and at our soundcheck, John Lydon (a.k.a. Johnny Rotten - Ed.) was there, as were members of what would become the Clash and the Jam, and Chrissie Hynde was then writing for the *New Music Express*. Shortly afterwards we did a major European tour with Talking Heads supporting us, and by then things were hopping. I feel that in '76 we revolutionized rock and roll, bringing a whole new sound and attitude to music.

R&RD: How did you feel about being role models?

Joey: It was exciting, I mean, when we were in England, we were treated like royalty and London was like a circus, everybody had wild colored hair. There's something about London that's very colorful anyway, but it was a time very similar to the way Carnaby Street must have been in the mid-60's.

R&RD: What were the conditions under which you recorded your debut album?

Johnny: They put me in a separate room, which we never did again. After that we always stayed real close to each other in the studio. What we were trying to do was have an interesting separation while maintaining our live sound. The Beatles had put all the instruments on one side, the vocals on the other and...those things don't work. No wonder nobody was doing it. But we were just trying to do something different.

R&RD: Let's break from the chronology a minute and talk about some of the classic songs. What do you remember about the creation of "Blitzkrieg Bop"?

Johnny: I know that we wanted to do a chant song along the lines of the Bay City Rollers' "Saturday Night." Tommy wrote the basic idea and then we made revisions because his words weren't really on the same wavelength of what we were doing.

R&RD: "Beat On the Brat"?

Joey: When I lived in Forest Hills, I lived in an apartment house called Birchwood Towers with my mom and my brother and there were all these stuck-up, snobby ladies around who would spit on the ground you walked on as you strolled by -- like they were *so* wonderful -- and they had these real bratty kids who would get away with murder. So that's what it grew out of. It was a fantasy. That's what I felt like. I felt like killing them.

R&RD: Your third album, *Rocket To Russia* is generally acknowledged to be your greatest. How do you feel about that album today?

Johnny: It's my favorite album out of all the ones we've done, simply because there are more classic songs on it than any other. By the time we had gotten signed to a recording contract, we already had all the songs for the first and second albums written and what we decided to do was record them chronologically and present them to the record company, 14 songs at a time, because we didn't want them picking the best out of what we had leaving us with nothing to follow the first record up with. By picking what they liked best it leaves you with the danger that your second won't be as good as your first. And doing it that way, we still had songs left over for *Rocket To Russia*. "I Don't Care" is one of the first songs we

ever wrote. At that point in time, we felt that the whole punk thing was going to be really big and we just wanted to make sure we did a really good album, that's all. We didn't want there to be any letdown between it and *Leave Home*.

Joey: *Rocket To Russia* is a great album and it's one of my favorites too. I like *Leave Home* a lot and *Road To Ruin* is a great album. I like *End of the Century* and *Too Tough To Die*...I guess *Rocket To Russia* is more singular songular (laughs), but aside from the sound and the attitude that album cover also got a lot of acclaim, what with the brick wall background and our stances in front of it. That album, from the artwork to the songs and performances holds its title as the classic Ramones record. A lot of people said it was our *Sgt. Pepper*.

R&RD: Getting back to songs for a moment, what can you tell me about the inspiration behind "Teenage Lobotomy"?

Joey: Well, I didn't write that myself, although I brought the title to the band. I guess it's basically about being different, being an outcast, an individual...not going with the massive flow.

R&RD: Did you guys ever actually go to Rockaway Beach?

Joey: Dee Dee used to go there every summer, because he didn't live all that far from there. Johnny used to go there. I was there a few times. Dee Dee wrote "Rockaway Beach."

You know, I usually don't say there's an art to writing great songs, but I guess there is. During the late 50's and 60's there seemed to be a real concentrated effort on the part of bands to write great songs -- think of all those songs by the Animals, the Doors, the Stooges, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones -- you'll remember "Happy Jack" and "The Kids Are Alright" forever. I don't know what happened, but by the time *Rocket To Russia* came out, all this elongated album oriented rock started getting very formulated and watered down, sterile. There were no songs or guts or attitude or feeling in music anymore. What you got was ELP and Kansas. What happened to the excitement? Where did rock and roll go? One day you had the Animals with the power stuff full of character and excitement and the next day you had Styx. I couldn't sing along with Kansas and who would want to anyway? When we started up and were making those early albums, that was what was going on. What we did was reassemble and Roto-Rooter it, almost like it was a clogged toilet. Our objective was to put those elements back in and to make the music fun and exciting again.

R&RD: Whose idea was it to go a more mid-tempo route on *Road To Ruin?*

Johnny: I think somebody within the band mentioned we could probably use more variety -- if you keep putting 14 fast songs on an album it's going to get monotonous, so *Road To Ruin* is the first album you hear us going for that variety, using acoustic guitars on "Don't Come Close" and "Questioningly."

Joey: Some songs were more like spurts of energy and others were allowed to be ballads.

R&RD: What made you decide to do *It's Alive*, your only live release to date (with the excpetion of the medley on *Rock and Roll High School*), and why has it only been available as an import in this country?

Joey: Well, the show itself, which took place on New Year's Eve in 1977, was a real historic show. By then punk was in full bloom; it had arrived and was out to change the world and everybody that was anybody was there. It really was like the first anniversary of punk.

Now at the time we were managed by Danny Fields and he had taken on a partner, Linda Stein, Seymour Stein's ex-wife, and they filmed it as well as recorded it. What happened was Sire decided that we should go with a studio album as a follow-up to *Rocket To Russia* and since *Road To Ruin* was recorded and ready to go, they put that out here and only released *It's Alive* in England.

R&RD: What's the reason it's never been released here, particularly on CD?

Joey: Well, it might be in the near future. Beginning in January our whole catalog is going to be coming out on CD. The first and second album will be on one CD with additional material that never saw the light of day. It's kind of a cool idea and it's going to coincide with a home video of early footage and TV shows we've done here and abroad, and all our videos. In February you'll have *Rocket To Russia* and *Road To Ruin* on one CD. I think it's exciting, especially since it'll allow us to make available B-sides and other material that was never available in America.

R&RD: You made your film debut in *Rock and Roll High School*. Was appearing in films an early ambition?

Johnny: Actually somebody approached us about it, asking if we could book a concert, which we did, just so director Alan Arkus could see us. We had been recommended to him after he approached Cheap Trick and they turned him down. So they came, liked us, and we're still friends with all involved. It's a good film for what it is.

R&RD: Everybody has their own picture in their mind of what Phil Spector, who worked with you on *End of the Century*, is like, but were there idiosyncracies or other things that surprised you about him?

Joey: Like him not having enough idiosyncracies or what? (laughs) Yeah, well, Phil was definitely a rare bird. Let's just say he was full of surprises. It was a total experience, beyond taking LSD even, but it was unique. He's a total character. It was total insanity doing that album -- and it almost didn't get finished -- but I like that album a lot and I did enjoy Phil and his zaniness. People say the finished product doesn't sound like the Ramones, but it was an experiment, something that'll never be repeated. It was stated in the contract that Phil could do two albums with us, but that'll never happen. Once was plenty.

R&RD: Did he really spend eight hours mixing the opening chord to the version of "Rock and Roll High School" that appears on the album?

Joey: He probably spent more than eight hours, enough to drive you totally insane. I mean, first of all, the control room would be like an icebox. We did it in L.A. at Gold Star studios and it was like 90 degrees outside and you wished you had taken your winter coat out of mothballs. He made them play that note over and over and over again, this is before he recorded it. And then after recording it, he must've played it back a thousand times, which I couldn't fathom at the time. But listening to it later on, I've come to the conclusion that it definitely has a resonance similar to the opening of "Strawberry Fields."

R&RD: He works very slowly, which, at least up to that point, is something the Ramones never did. Did you learn any of the virtues of working slowly while working with Spector?

Joey: Oh it was hell. There were times when we'd have nine basic tracks done in a day and with Phil you were lucky if you got one track, one basic track, done in a day. If it wasn't for the video games they had in the other room, we would've been total mental cases, but then again, we got pretty good at video games.

R&RD: Do you think that in the 80's the band has gone through an evolutionary process, from being a punk band to more of a metal band and then back to a punk band?

Johnny: I thought we were getting a little soft around *Pleasant Dreams* -- we had a wimpy producer in Graham Gouldman. I mean, how could anybody from 10cc relate to the Ramones?

Marky: I don't like *Subterranean Jungle* either. The production on that was the worst.

Johnny: I think what happened was there came a point when we all realized that we were getting outside pressure to have a hit, that we were trying to be commercial where we shouldn't be. If we have a hit we have to have a hit with a song that represents the Ramones. At times it gets frustrating seeing bands that are nowhere near as good and they get played and...you start feeling that. I mean, you've got to not worry about that and just be thankful for the careeer that we have. The Ramones are a unique thing and we should stick to doing what we do. We came to our senses on *Too Tough To Die* and each album since then has been fine. I think there was a time when the hardcore kids were beginning to feel that hardcore bands played faster than the Ramones or that we had gotten soft, so with *Too Tough* we wanted to show them that we play hard stuff better than those other guys do and that we play faster than anybody.

R&RD: Was there any fear on your part that by putting out *Ramonesmania* you might satisfy some of the interest among record buyers in having your catalog come out on CD?

Joey: *Ramonesmania* was more of a collector's item than a best-of, first of all because we chose all the songs rather than our record company. A lot of bands put out best-ofs comprised of songs that have already been put out, but on *Ramonesmania* the mixes were all different -- for instance, there are four different mixes of "Rock and Roll High School." It was more for the record enthusiast who gets off on the technical differences of a different mix

R&RD: When you guys started out, you were synonymous with the punk movement . What do you think the Ramones represent today?

Johnny: I guess what we represent is a unique hard rock band that has lasted 15 years. There aren't many bands that are the real thing.

Joey: To me the Ramones are our own brand of music. I feel like we're totally unique and you can count on us not to let you down or turn into Bon Jovi or something like that. We created a unique sound and style, something everybody else would love to achieve, but few do — from the time rock and roll started there's only been a handful of bands that have achieved that, like the Beatles, the Stones, Led Zeppelin, the Who,...and the Ramones. ◆